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"THE COPPERHEAD"

AUGUSTUS THOMAS'S GREATEST PLAY

WHATEVER difference of opinion there may be about this or that detail of "The Copperhead," Mr. Thomas's latest drama, it is certainly the most stirring play ever written by our leading dramatist. We will go further and say that no American play so far presented ever lifted the soul to a loftier and more poetic state of emotion.

Therefore since it is the mission of art to express our own emotions and, better still, to stir the emotions of mankind and, since a work of art is great in ratio of its power of stirring the highest emotions of the largest number of people, "The Copperhead" is great, because a greatly exalting work of art. And this verdict was rendered on the evening of February 18th by the large first night audience in one of the most spontaneous and tumultuous ovations ever given to a play in New York. This alone places it instantly among the truly great dramas created by American genius and one destined to live as long as Abraham Lincoln shall be revered and whose spirit, evoked by the play, seemed to have entered and filled the entire theatre during the last great act of the drama and to have penetrated to the very heart and soul of every auditor present. It was electric. It was profound. It was exalting to the highest degree. The audience was united into a mass of truly patriotic Americans filled with a profound sense of gratitude to Lincoln and to all those who stood by him and for all they had suffered and conquered for us, in order that we might be more free and more great.

Without having been intended as such it has now become in reality a noble apotheosis of Lincoln.

We lose sight of the splendid play-building of Mr. Thomas and the superb acting of Lionel Barrymore and busy ourselves, under the spur of an imperious emotion, to rapidly synthesize and contemplate the whole tragic epic of the Civil War of which Lincoln was the apex and the victor-martyr. It is a subconscious and mystic apotheosis, it is true. But it is none the less a veritable "transfiguration" of Lincoln. It is for that reason that the play will live as surely as Lincoln's memory lasts in the heart of America.

For no portrait, picture or statue; no poem, or story, or song, so far presented, has shown the same mystic power of electrifying our imagination into activity enough to grasp, in one quick vision, the sublimity of the character of the Savior of the Union, and to make so swift and panoramic a review

of the events of the four years of which Lincoln's death was the culmination.

Beside this towering fact how trivial the contradictory discussion of the critics about this or that technical shortcoming, according to the dreary little fetish-rules of play-making dear to the mind of this or that critic who thinks he must go to the theatre lynx-eyed to ferret out petty technical faults—and which perhaps are virtues—instead of giving a holiday to his soul and inviting it to be ecstasized until the eyes run over with tears!

One example of short-sighted criticism is the query by a critic as to why Shanks, the hero, did not, after the war was over, reveal his true character. This question, despite the fact that one of Shanks's fellow conspirators in the play, after thirty-eight years have passed, tries to kill him upon such a discovery. In view of this Mr. Thomas might ask what would the foiled co-conspirators of Shanks have done if he had revealed his true character immediately after the war?

Or he might further answer the critic by asking if Mr. Pinkerton, after foiling and convicting several of the old "Molly McGuires," would have chosen to tell that he was not of their number but was instead a secret service man and have then tried to live among them safely.

Besides, in the first act Shanks reveals that he was really a secret service agent—by telling the preacher to go to St. Louis and warn General Lyon of the activities of the real copperheads, and he hints at it in the second act when he begs his wife not to talk so loud for fear of making all the neighbors hear her and so betray him.

One great charm of "The Copperhead" is that its author does not load it with banalities or explain things a grammar school intelligence would divine. If a woman drops a flat-iron why arrest the play to explain Newton's theory of gravitation?

Had Mr. Thomas made more explanations he would have made the climax in the last act ineffective and so spoiled his play. As it is the first act is fine, the second better, the third still finer and the fourth act great.

No American, desirous of enriching his soul with moments of high emotion worthy of being lived over and over again, should fail to see "The Copperhead," the loftiest event that has happened on the American stage in a quarter of a century.

